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A qualitative evaluation of a mentoring reading programme for 9-10 year olds in Northern Ireland

Oscar Odena, School of Education, University of Brighton¹

Sarah Miller, Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast

Susan Kehoe, Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast

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**This document was prepared for oral delivery. For literal quotations please refer to the full
report by Miller, Connolly, Odena and Styles (2009) available at
www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEducation/CentreforEffectiveEducation/Publications**

Introduction. Background information

This paper discusses the qualitative evaluation of a mentoring reading programme for 9-10 year olds, which was part of a larger evaluation that used a mixed-methods approach including a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) to determine whether there was evidence of improved outcomes for children participating in the scheme (Miller et al. 2009). The mentoring reading programme started in 1999 with 3 schools and by the time of this evaluation had more than 130 schools involved, with an emphasis on socially deprived areas. The programme consisted of volunteers, or 'mentors', from businesses in Northern Ireland (NI), who were going one hour a week to local Primary schools to read books with children with the aim of improving the children's reading skills and develop their enjoyment of reading. Each volunteer mentored two children for 30 minutes weekly, and stayed with the same children for the duration of the programme. This type of support scheme is perceived as very timely because the need to improve the children's opportunities, particularly in socially deprived areas, where conditions are in part exacerbated due to recent historical events – see Connolly (2009a) for a detailed description of the NI post-conflict environment.

Methodology

The results of a previous qualitative evaluation completed six years before the present one suggested a positive perception of the programme by all actors involved but outlined the need for a broader study to systematically track the children's development. Hence the present evaluation was commissioned to explore the effects of the programme, specifically on the following four predetermined outcomes:

- (a) the children's self-esteem,
- (b) the children's enjoyment of learning,
- (c) their reading skills,
- (d) and their aspirations for the future.

Fifty schools participated in the RCT, in which quantitative measures were collected from children at the start of the programme and every four months for a period of two years, tracking any developments of the above four outcomes – for more information on the RCT, including ethical considerations, see the full report by Miller et al. (2009), available at www.gub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEducation/CentreforEffectiveEducation/Publications. A qualitative evaluation was also carried out to further explore issues related to the implementation of the programme. To this aim, four schools were selected following a 'maximum variation' sampling approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The criteria for selection was to include schools that (a) had scope for improvement in several aspects of the implementation of the programme or that (b) were perceived by developers as excelling with the implementation. This approach is useful when the aim is not to study the average but divergent cases. The main purpose was to learn more about (a) strategies that worked in difficult situations - and how they worked - and (b) strategies that did not appear to be effective even in ideal circumstances and the reasons why this may have happened.

For each of the four schools the following participants were interviewed: the teachers with children involved in the programme, the Head, a focus group with 5-7 children, two volunteer mentors, and the programme developers. The final number of interviewees was 47. The sample of schools chosen included the main types of schools found in NI. Difficulties regarding 'insiders' researching mixed groups in NI (Carlisle, 2007) were avoided due to the interviewer (and first author) 'outsider' Spanish status.

The focus of the qualitative evaluation was *to explore the hindering and facilitating factors to the implementation of the programme*. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the full transcripts of the semi-structured interviews, reading repeatedly each transcript and looking for commonalities and emerging issues – this analysis approach has also been described as

recursive comparative analysis (Leitch et al., 2007, 2008; Odena, 2007, 2009; Odena & Welch, 2007, 2009).

A number of facilitating factors emerged from the interviews' analysis, including the personal enjoyment and intrinsic motivation of participants, as well as the availability of resources. Hindering factors included lack of communication between mentors and schools/teachers and the varying sense of ownership of the adults participating. From the analysis, the interviewees' general views on the programme were also elucidated. The following sections offer some examples of quotations from pupils, mentors and teachers.

Some examples of data - Pupils

Pupils in focus groups used invented names and were provided with sheets of paper and pencils and asked to individually draw 'how do you feel when you are in one of the sessions with your mentor?'. After 4-5 minutes and while they were finishing their drawings the interviewer invited each child to explain them. Subsequently, a number of questions focussing on programme implementation were asked, allowing for interaction between participants – for more information on this focus group technique see Leitch et al. (2007). These are some representative drawings and quotations:

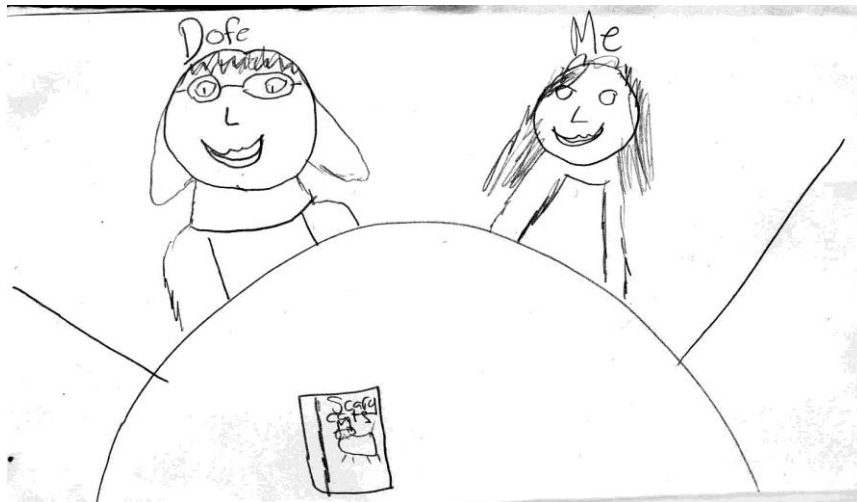


I used to be really slow and things when I was reading and since [my mentor] came I've been getting quite fast

[Vince] Sometimes they tell you when to stop, and they help you on really, really long difficult words...

[Chelsea] *If it's a big long word, they'd put their finger on each one and you have to say it out loud, and then they go, "So what is it?" and you know what it is...*

[Vince] *And say if somebody is saying something, they make you say it with enthusiasm*



I like [my mentor] and it's fun to read a book with her. I sort of liked reading, yeah. But I enjoy them more with her.

You learn new words in the reading. Big words.

All children had positive views on the sessions. Nevertheless, not all pupils' observations were backed by sound educational reasons:

[Interviewer] *What time do you think is best for mentoring?*

[Frasier] *Half nine 'till quarter to ten, quarter to ten 'till ten*

[Indiana] *When we're in the middle of a test!*

Mentors

Mentors observed that their voluntary participation was linked with their willingness to help pupils and, sometimes, with personal reasons:

When the programme was explained at my business I was very glad to help children in the middle skills range with their reading

Having children of my own, I very much liked to be involved. Perhaps I feel I hadn't done much with my own and wanted to make it up

For other mentors, part of the motivation appeared to be supported by their company's offer of time off:

My organisation is very keen for us to participate, you get time off...and I enjoy it

Teachers

Overall, teachers perceived benefits in both types of school, but benefits were often tied with individual pupils:

I think it has had a dramatic impact on their confidence, their enjoyment of reading, and certainly it has made them more interested in book titles that they previously were not.

For one of those children his confidence has definitely grown and in terms of expression, the intonation of his reading has improved a great deal. And I'm sure that the programme has had some part to play in that...They seem to enjoy going out and reading with their mentor, and hopefully that transfers into their reading as a whole.

It's very hard to work out how much of their improvement is through the programme, how much of their improvement is simply through what's going on in class and my own teaching...If I was to hazard an estimation, I would say that it has definitely benefited one of the children, significantly. And the other I wouldn't say it has benefited a great deal.

The benefits are that these children are having individual time spent with an adult that perhaps they are not receiving at home.

There were some examples of lack of communication between teachers and mentors (hindering factor) but generally, teachers were supportive of the programme - additional examples are available in the full report:

I don't know an awful lot about what actually goes on. In fact if you ask me exactly what goes on within that I'm not exactly sure....what their objectives are, what they're reading with the children.

I think it would benefit more children if more children could be involved in it, because I know there are children in my class that, even just a little bit of one-on-one time would really really help them.

Concluding thoughts and implications for future evaluations

On completion of the RCT it was found that the programme significantly increased the children's future aspirations, but no significant effects were found in relation to the children's general levels of self-esteem, enjoyment of education and general reading skills. A further exploratory analysis suggested an effect for particular subgroups (boys with low initial levels of self-esteem and reading ability). However, the overall report argued that findings should be treated with caution and recommended undertaking an additional RCT focussing on specific rather than general outcomes. Issues brought up by teachers in different settings (e.g. benefits reported for particular pupils, their enjoyment of reading rather than education in general) may be seen as an early indication of the difficulties encountered in finding significant effects in relation to any general outcomes in the group as a whole.

From this study a number of implications for future evaluations may be suggested. First, the need for investing time at the start of any programme evaluation in identifying specific outcomes, in close consultation with programme developers and other key stakeholders (an additional implication would be for the outcomes to be feasible within the programme timescale). A second implication would be the need for collecting qualitative data, as part of any process evaluation, in order to explore issues related with programme implementation. Such data can offer researchers useful insights when interpreting the overall results and preparing reports.

Finally, there is a need for a continuing, open and genuine debate amongst researchers on what counts as evidence in applied research and evaluation practice (Donaldson et al., 2009). The BERA Special Interest Group Research Methodology in Education appears to be an appropriate forum for such debate. Using a mixed-methods approach to determine the effectiveness of educational programmes raises a number of questions concerning how evidence is collected, who can know it, and ultimately, what is evidence - for a further discussion of the challenges facing effectiveness research see Connolly (2009b).

It would appear that, for the benefit of the academic community, any research design would need to be justified, first and foremost, by their power to address the questions under enquiry. To exemplify this final point I would like to end with a quotation from early in the last century by Weber ([1917] 2004: 30), which still applies in our current methodological debates:

Academic prophecies can only ever produce fanatical sects, but never a genuine community.

Note:

¹ This paper was delivered by the first author, who collected the data presented here while working at the Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast. The evaluation team is very grateful to all the children and adults that participated in the study for generously giving their time.

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